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Why a Child Needs a Critical Eye, and Why the Art Classroom is Central in Developing it

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Abstract

It is a common acceptance that contemporary schoolchildren live in a world that is intensely visual and commercially motivated, where what is imagined and what is experienced intermingle. Because of this, contemporary education should encourage a child to make reference to, and connection with their 'out-of-school' life.

The core critical underpinnings of curriculum-based arts appreciation and theory hinge on educators and students taking a historical look at the ways artists have engaged with, and made comment upon, their contemporary societies. My article uses this premise to argue for the need to persist with pushing for critique of/through the visual, that it be delivered as an active process via the arts classroom rather than as visual literacy, here regarded as a more passive process for interpreting and understanding visual material.

The article asserts that visual arts lessons are best placed to provide fully students with such critique because they help students to develop a 'critical eye', an interpretive lens often used by artists to view, analyse and independently navigate and respond to contemporary society.

Introduction

Visual literacy is an aspect of contemporary school curricular that might describe a process of building visual acuity in unpacking and reading contemporary, visual material. Although not exclusively so, visual literacy is not often included as part of the visual arts curriculum but is often placed elsewhere such as in studies of English. This article aims to challenge this fairly recent curricular arrangement by calling for a return to educational interdisciplinarity whereby the wider school curriculum supports the arts as a central place from which to examine a child's relationship with visual culture. Rogoff (1998) suggests the status of visual culture is a study area that provides teachers and students with opportunities to explore the diverse and elusive contexts of visual images. This freedom also suggests a possible problematisation of how visual culture is commonly engaged with in many schools. Curriculum cannot support for example, colonisation of particular skills within a hierarchised system of disciplines, but should instead apply a sensitivity to thinking about how best a child might forge relationships with contemporary culture.

The visual culture I refer to in this article encompasses contemporary and historical artworks produced by artists as well as the visual adverts, television, video, digital interfaces and the like of popular culture. I will assert that critique of visual culture should radiate from the art classroom. I will support this assertion via a comparative discussion of three video production projects that fulfilled different objectives, were initiated by teachers with varied skills and pedagogical expertises, and produced diverse responses from the students. I will conclude by making a call for a rethinking of current curriculum around the teaching of visual culture.

Critique within visual arts education

The arts classroom cannot hope to be central in engaging students in critiquing the visual material of contemporary society if visual arts education curricular remains attached to modernist ideologies (Hughes 1998). Until a shift occurs at the executive level of curriculum planning, an assumption about what visual art education 'is'

will remain firmly conceptualised as particular studio practices such as ceramics, painting, drawing and Eurocentric art history study. Historical ideologies, such as the apprentice practice model, or arts appreciation based on structural semiotics methodologies (Peirce 1991; Saussure 1983) do not engage students with some current artist methodologies (such as bricolage, appropriation, virtual realities), key to much contemporary visual arts practice (Duncum 2007; Rogoff 1998). A resistance to accepting mass-produced imagery as examples of visual influence and output is problematic and needs dismantling because students may, when presented solely with European artworks, regard them as a nonsense or so far removed from their own worlds that they fail to engage deeply with the material (Rogoff 1998). Part of this gulf emerges from the unease that adults have, and the ease that students have, in critiquing the 'various fictions' (Rogoff 1998, 26) of contemporary visual culture. Pluralist interrogation must be available and embedded in the arts education classroom.

Why try and change old habits? Many, including myself, were educated more than adequately in a modernist educational system, so why is it now important to rethink the choice and critique of visual material? A new vision for the visual arts (within modernist curriculum frameworks of discipline-discrete subject areas) gives students opportunities to respond and question histories via personal visualised outputs that closely associate with the images in contemporary society. Like those 'outside', schoolchildren have opportunities to actively initiate and participate in a cycle of gaze and production or gaze and action/reaction rather than being passive receptors of dissemination (Rogoff 1998). Hierarchised power structures are broken down because the spectator now actively decides meaning, no longer needing to sit powerlessly to one side.

Postmodern influences on thought and culture facilitate opportunities for pluralist interpretation (Rogoff 1998) and a re-examination of high and low art practices. This presents a challenge to 'a single, local perspective ... presented as "central" and "universal"' (Shohat & Stam 1998, 38). Students need an education that reflects a profes-

sional world which engages in visual culture in trans-disciplinary ways (Mirzoeff 1998). This helps in interpreting 'the convoluted and limitless circulation of signs, codes and discourses' (Mansfield 2003, 72) of culture. Requests to leave the influence of popular visual discourses 'on the doorstep when arriving at school each day' (Grace & Tobin 1998, 46) cannot be maintained for much longer as 'The aesthetics of our commodity, entertainment culture is not an afterthought; it is a deeply inherent part of the designer capitalist ideology' (Duncum 2007, 289).

School, and particularly art education, has a responsibility to educate students about culture, to expose them to its nature and award them with critical, analytical tools to negotiate it.

Visual art teachers are well positioned to develop critical interpretation skills because they can effectively examine how contemporary artists also reference and interrogate popular imagery. Examining the practices of different producers of visual cultural material in the art classroom enables students to extend beyond looking at the product (culture) and an analysis of the product (artwork), by crucially giving them opportunity to participate in the process (make their own artwork response). As Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson (1990, 181) state:

it does not seem to matter whether a person is most responsive to the cognitive, the expressive, or the visual elements of art. What does seem to matter, however, is whether this responsiveness is personally meaningful and whether it becomes progressively more complex with time.

The opportunity to produce a visual response in partnership with scrutinising processes facilitates a consolidation of what it means to be a consumer and a producer of visual culture. This encourages a situation of ownership for the student, forging strong connections between their school learning and personal interests (Burgess & Addison 2007). This is much more desired, certainly on the part of the student, than a curriculum that ignores the visual material they know in preference for content that they do not identify with (Richards 1998).

Some teachers may feel comfortable in delivering this more highly connected curriculum, while others may be uncomfortable in acknowledging this change, resolutely remaining entrenched in historical pedagogies. Their resistance can be because, as Bourdieu (1968/1993, 226) suggests:

In periods of rupture, the inertia inherent in art competencies ... means that the works produced by means of art production instruments of a new type are bound to be perceived, for a certain time, by means of old instruments of perception.

This rupture requires a break with prioritising the mastery of traditional vernacular artistic skills, of exhibiting contexts, and reading of such works left to those with privy information on the 'grand narrative'. Modernist approaches to teaching the arts are no longer effective because students live within pluralistic, aestheticised cultures (Duncum 2007). It is important that visual art teachers embrace this change to continue to critique effectively the meanings of contemporary culture within a subject that has the study of aesthetics embedded within it.

To send the study of visual culture elsewhere in the curriculum intensifies a situation where 'the illusion of immediate comprehension leads to an illusory comprehension based on a mistaken code' (Bourdieu 1968/1993, 216). For example, visual literacy teachers from outside the visual arts might apply inappropriate, historically positioned aesthetic decoding models to interpret contemporary postmodern, digital or virtual material. Use of inappropriate decoding means that the subtle meanings embedded in these contemporary works are often missed or poorly interrogated.

Situating the critique of contemporary visual culture within the arts classroom provides for an extension on discursive forms of analysis. Art education allows the written to form a much smaller portion of student output and it can continue to utilise art history to link threads to past practices and to diverse resources with differing viewpoints. Artists have used powerful visual mechanisms to make connections to their contemporary societies. Such tensions between

art production and its references to society have long been in existence. Berger's (1980/1991) essay on the painter Millet demonstrates how, historically, the contemporary concerns of the painter can be foregrounded when discussed from an art history position. In the school context, art education presents students with methods for making connections between their ideas and the work of other artists, and hints at how to comment on contemporary issues through personal art production. The ability for a student to talk about art process from some level of shared knowledge base, no matter how rudimentary, provides an extra avenue of meaning.

Three examples

It is useful to discuss three examples of school video productions that emerge from different educational contexts which explored similar issues.

Video production is particularly appropriate to discuss in the context of this article due to its multiple positioning as contemporary art practice, mass entertainment vehicle and communication device. Because video, or recorded film, pervades contemporary society so deeply it could be argued that children interact and critically engage with the discipline with more power or knowledge than with other forms of art practice (such as the long tradition of fine art painting and the study of aesthetics, for example). The multidimensional nature of video also facilitates discussion on its mutability and how or whether these multiple aspects are fully explored in educational scenarios effectively.

Briefly, the examples discussed here include a video produced by year 10 boys in North London, UK for a Media Studies/English project (Buckingham 1998b), a video produced by year 3 students in Hawaii, USA as part of their video curriculum (Grace & Tobin 1998), and a video produced by 12–17 year old boys in East London, UK as part of a public art programme (Illingworth 2005).

Grace & Tobin's (1998) project used video as an expressive form of literacy to allow children to challenge the expected constructs of their daily behaviour in school. The authors focus their dissemination of the project on a student-produced

video that presented a satire on the adult authority figures found in school. The students watching the video found it highly amusing, as 'Performers and audience are fused in a surge of camaraderie' (p. 42), however the teachers felt uneasy about the transgression of classroom norms as they realised 'The equilibrium of the classroom has been unsettled. Taken for granted boundaries have blurred before our eyes' (p. 42).

Buckingham's (1998b) video project involved groups of boys producing an imaginary trailer for a new television series. One group produced a film titled *Flat Broke*, that featured various character stereotypes including 'a feminist, a tart, a sexist rude Greek, and a gay' (Jamie, quoted in Buckingham, 1998b, 73). Buckingham details in his recount of the project that teachers and other students were concerned about the appropriateness of the video for a target youth audience, and whether the extremely stereotyped characters might be too offensive.

The projects had positive and negative impacts on teachers and students. Grace & Tobin (1998, 43) positively assert that the students enjoyed being able to contest power relationships embedded in the school context, because for the 'children, these moments of curricular slippage and excess provided the opportunity to produce their own pleasures, on their own terms'. By contrast, Buckingham's (1998b, 77) evaluation focuses on the ethical dilemmas faced by teachers with powers 'which are reinforced by the disciplinary structures of the school' when dealing with student works that are informed by contrasting ideologies around representation and stereotyping.

Buckingham's (1998b) discussion of the video project highlights the dilemma teachers face in initiating work that incorporates contemporary visual practices when the teachers do not have familiarity with the media to critique fully how such outputs might be constructed or received. Despite Grace & Tobin's (1998) more positive evaluation, they recognise that the literal responses their students presented needed more attention on production to allow children to make connections about school behaviour on their own terms.

Each scenario suggests that the children were encouraged to consider contemporary cultural issues, but that this was rudimentary and problematic because they did not receive equally detailed instruction on how such critique might surface within video production. The projects, because they emerged from outside the arts did not consider the creative sophistication or impact of their work. Visual arts education can provide students with exposure to how artists convert, subvert and play with a message. While each project initiated positive experiences for the participants, the results were crude in their production because teacher and students had had little connection with artistic processes for making video works.

The third example, *Bare Dust*, was produced as part of a public art programme in East London, created collaboratively by the artist Shona Illingworth and a group of 12–17 year old boys living in the local area. Illingworth's personal, reflective narrative on the project (2005, 42–9) demonstrates a very different approach to the process of creating a video response to key cultural issues faced by the group of boys. An aim of the work was to connect to the boys' everyday personal lives as well as make connections with a wider viewing audience. This suggests Illingworth recognised the need to connect art making to the wider aspects of contemporary visual culture. She also considered the potential message of the finished product and the potency of the process such as 'the position of the viewer, fragmented narrative, constructed realities, differing perspectives, identity, stereotyping, ambiguity and interpretation, as well as abstract notions such as atmosphere, space, time and orientation' (p. 49).

This highly sophisticated understanding was possible because Illingworth had prior experience of making and presenting such works. She acknowledged the sophisticated visualising skills of the students and could bring that into her teaching. The artist can personally invest in the art process by drawing on this prior experience of translating ideas into production and show students ways of critiquing art processes and images from visual culture to weave it into their art making. A description of the conceptualisa-

tion of *Bare Dust* demonstrates how an art practitioner/educator can effectively connect ideas, theories and practices:

Football provided me with a vehicle to explore the boys' relationship to their estate. In the video they map out their area with a fluid and eloquent control of the ball, playing a game that has no end and where no goals are scored ... the boys are isolated, and given little stake in their surroundings. When playing football however, everything is focused on the intensity of the moment, the continually shifting group dynamic and a briefly shared fantasy of the future ... it is an investigation of a place ... fragments of speech are highly specific but do not form personal narratives. Instead they are pared down to suggest the violence, threat and pressures that exist for young people. (Illingworth 2005, 45)

All three examples initiate positive learning experiences for the participating students. Grace & Tobin (1998) found that giving students the chance to explore ideas through production made them less passive viewers of contemporary media. Buckingham (1998b) recognised that students and teachers need to familiarise themselves with the particular discourses of the media being explored or produced, and Illingworth (2005) recognised the boys' difficulty in expressing deep emotional relationships to their environment and that this needs addressing prior to them producing a response. All examples recognise that critiquing contemporary visual culture includes the reading of multicultural, multi-modal texts, particularly when the boundaries between advertising, TV, art, personal webspace sites and the like have blurred considerably. However, it has been difficult for some teachers to examine and initiate effectively projects in visual culture, especially if they have not had prior experience in producing such work themselves.

Critical underpinnings

As Grace & Tobin (1998) suggest, bringing discourses of popular culture into school can challenge historically established power structures between learner and educator. Bourdieu's

(1968/1993, 220) assertion that 'Those for whom the works of scholarly culture speak a foreign language are condemned to take into their perception and their appreciation of the work of art some extrinsic categories and values' might seem to suggest a call to maintain modernist discourse hierarchies whereby only a select few hold the skills or knowledge to interpret fine art. It also highlights how teachers can assist students in accruing good quality critical viewing tools to interrogate rigorously the familiar visuals of popular culture. Just because visual discourses circulate within popular youth culture, encountered by the student in their everyday life, it does not guarantee they engage with them on any more than a superficial level if they are not able to interpret or critique them from some other position than that of a passive consumer.

Schools are concerned about the negative effects that exposure to popular culture has on them (Buckingham 1998a; Grace & Tobin 1998) and are therefore reluctant to include it as pedagogical material (Duncum 2007). This position has fundamentally altered since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11 is itself a globally recognised symbol of a shift in world identity, politics, zeitgeist) so it is essential for students to think about how 'truths' are constructed globally across cultures. Children need critical tools to make sense of the various propaganda tactics of cultures and how these seep through into popular visual production, masquerading as reportage. As aesthetics is central to the reception of information (Duncum 2007), visual art education can actively examine such tactics through critical analysis skills (Mansfield 2003). Poststructural questioning enables students and teachers to use visually oriented material to wrestle collectively with complex issues and allow for ideas that challenge hierarchies of position in more subtle and ironic ways. Arts educators can help students question even the most populist of 'truths', to teach about 'a broader visual culture, which goes way beyond the "beauty full" classroom' (Mansfield 2003, 73).

Poststructural education practices allow teachers and students to challenge the normative truths that have historically permeated through school education in relation to content facts and cultural

histories. Poststructural visual arts practices not only encourage interrogation of visual material but who establishes meaning and to what end. As Grierson (2003, 102) states: 'poststructural enquiry goes something like this: that there is no longer any faith in the one and only "truth" or stable and unified view of the world'.

Looking at visual cultures within the visual arts enables the viewer to understand more about their relationships with the visual image, that it is more than a sense of passive, structural visualising; that for each viewer there is no 'this is how it is' but 'this is how I see it'. Such examinations enable the viewer to ask questions of the process of meaning as well as of the meaning. Reading imagery from a poststructural perspective encourages objectivication of the image and the objects in the imagery to be considered in relation to pluralistic understandings. Viewers can consider the image as an end point *and* as a point of conception. Viewers have positional autonomy with which to form their own meanings in reference to any part of the creative process.

Poststructural teaching methods help to contest historicised, clinically scientific models for arts appreciation that position the viewer as passive and separate. The Lacanian (1973/1998) assertion that the experiences and the processes of seeing an image or visual object are essentially and inevitably personal support a call to have children asking critical questions about artworks that importantly embraces their ownership of those questions and appraisals from a number of viewing platforms that includes consumer, critic and cultural observer. Foucault's (1984/1998, 233) concept of the heterotopia as a virtual space that 'is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' is useful in explaining this concept of multiple viewing platforms or positionings. His suggestion that heterotopic spaces 'are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (p. 231) can, in contemporary visual culture, relate to artworks, adverts, websites and the like. where, within a two-dimensional space exists a series of three- and four-dimensional spaces (if digital space is included as a dimension). This complexity of co-existing spaces

makes it almost impossible to apply effectively modernist systems of analysis which are based on insider/outsider power relationships. Video production is part of a wider visual culture that actively and playfully encourages young people to inhabit and direct these mixed spaces, so it is important to utilise appropriate methodological processes for students to explore multiple positionings of viewer and protagonist in their appraisal or production of such works.

Conclusion

The critique of visual culture is a central function of the arts classroom and should be widely recognised as such. Because art teachers are familiar with the long historical relationship between art production and contemporary cultures, it is possible for them to construct poststructural project briefs that enable pluralistic responses by their students. This recognises what art education truly involves and forces a re-examination of persistent, historicised concepts of art education as a discrete subject that is preoccupied with modernist studio practices alone. Critical reviews of the UK arts curriculum undertaken over the last decade (Hughes 1998; Swift & Steers 1999) discuss a resistance, variously from curriculum reformers to teachers, to embracing philosophical and pedagogical change. As Mansfield (2003) suggests though, if arts education continues to be regarded by stakeholders through a positivist, modernist lens then the examination of visual culture will happen elsewhere in the curriculum and the critical engagement that the arts continuously makes with contemporary culture will be undervalued and undermined.

Art educators cannot sit back and simply hope their projects will be automatically highly regarded for their wide-ranging educational rigour. If art educators do not actively promote what they bring to the curriculum, they effectively offer over the control of looking at and interpreting images to others, forcing the arts to remain in a subject-discrete, defensive position, continuously trying to establish its value whilst being defined in an historic context. Arts education needs to be rein-vigorated and de-historicised, to enable critique of visual culture to form the central focus, and

equip students with analytical tools through which they may explore their own visual responses to their daily lives. Mansfield (2003, 71) recognises the urgent need for contemporary culture to embed itself into arts education, and 'that as arts educators, we are versed in deconstructive practices'. She recognises that teachers need opportunities to utilise their highly proficient analytic skills on images from popular culture to engage fully with contemporary visual works, and that such exercises form a sizeable part of their wider curriculum.

Rogoff (1998, 28) asks, 'Is the critical eye one that guards jealously against pleasure?'. Possibly. A critical eye could however, especially for the young, initiate processes of connecting that bring more power to the viewer, a necessary lens to interpret and thus become informed about culture.

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